DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 433 844 IR 057 474

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TITLE Marketing Strategies: Lessons for Libraries from Commercial Brand Management.
PUB DATE 1999-05-00
NOTE 9p.; In: The Future of Libraries in Human Communication: Abstracts and Fulltext Documents of Papers and Demos Given at the [International Association of Technological University Libraries] IATUL Conference (Chania, Greece, May 17-21, 1999) Volume 19; see IR 057 443.
AVAILABLE FROM Web site: http://educate.lib.chalmers.se/IATUL/proceedcontents/chanpap/wolpert.html
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Academic Libraries; Higher Education; Information Industry; Information Technology; Library Development; Library Services; *Research Libraries; World Wide Web
IDENTIFIERS Brand Awareness; Market Research; Market Value

ABSTRACT

This paper first argues that the World Wide Web at its best, has been able only to imitate the resources and services of an exemplary research library. It then goes on to examine how academic research libraries can take advantage of their brand identity as market leaders in the information business. The basic concept of brands and branding strategies in the commercial sector is explained, followed by implications for the academic research library. Characteristics of strong brands are then described, focusing on three elements: quality, attitude, and image. Specific advantages of brand equity for research libraries are outlined and the importance of having an explicit brand plan for managing information products and services is illustrated. (AEF)

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# MARKETING STRATEGIES: LESSONS FOR LIBRARIES FROM COMMERCIAL BRAND MANAGEMENT

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ED 433 844

MIT's Laboratory for Computer Science recently celebrated its 35th anniversary. As befits the home of such breakthrough technologies as time shared computing and the World Wide Web Consortium, the two-day event was both impressive and energizing. Computer celebrities were abundant, as were true stories of extraordinary progress in information technology, and soaring visions of a computer-enabled future.

Among the more memorable events for this librarian was an afternoon seminar on the future of computer user technologies. One of MIT's promising young faculty members chose to use his allotted time to describe his research in a field he calls Individualized Knowledge Access. Individualized Knowledge Access, to give an oversimplified description, involves the creation of a set of hardware and software tools designed to bring the information-rich world of the World Wide Web to the user in a highly customized, proactive manner. To illuminate the need for and importance of such research, he described the current search tools of the World Wide Web (WWW) in relationship to the existing strengths of the traditional research library; making the point that the best the web has to offer, at present, is simply a digital analog of the traditional research library. [Slide 1] For example:

- Both research libraries and the WWW offer vast amounts of easily accessible information;- but you have to find it before you can use it.
- Both research libraries and the WWW provide search tools that are designed to serve anonymous users in large numbers;- but you have to know how the tools work, and you must be sufficiently knowledgeable about the topic to be able to select from large retrieval sets those items that will be most useful.
- Both research libraries and the WWW have their own versions of "file not found";- for the Web it's "404", in libraries it's "not on shelf".

He went on to advise his computer science colleagues that the WWW has, thus far anyway, at best been able only to imitate the resources and services of an exemplary research library.

This true story illuminates the extraordinary importance of the brand identity possessed by academic research libraries. It should also serve as a wake-up call concerning our position in the marketplace of information. While academic research libraries have had the sense that we were chasing the emerging Web, it appears that, in fact, the Web is chasing us. We are, quite clearly, the market leader in the information business. We are the premium product, the high-road brand, the masters of market share, the standard against which all other information providers, including the WWW, compare themselves.

Any MBA student can tell you, however, that market share attracts competition. How, then, can libraries take advantage of our brand identity? More importantly, how can academic research libraries sustain this enviable brand position? Fortunately for us, the concept of brand equity is a well researched phenomenon

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in the business world, and there is a lot we can learn, as libraries, about retaining value and market share in the face of competition from information-industry upstarts and the WWW. This paper is but a brief overview of the academic discipline and established business practice known as brand management. It is hoped that the ideas presented here will spark your interest in the application of branding to libraries.

To understand the value of the brand equity of research libraries, we need to understand the basic concept of brands. The idea of branding is thousands of years old, and began when artisans and tradesmen started putting identifying marks on their products - both as a point of pride and as a sign of quality. Brick makers in ancient Egypt marked their bricks. Medieval trade guilds trademarked their products. The idea of assigning a memorable name to specific branded products arose as early as the 16th century, when high-quality whiskey distillers saw the need to protect consumers from being defrauded by lower quality product substitutions.

Over time, of course, the concept of brands has evolved into the marketing tool we know today. Yet the basic purposes of brand identity are still the same: **(1)** to make it easier for consumers to identify and remember a particular product, and **(2)** to strengthen the association of a product with one or more attributes of quality.

Today, branding strategies and purposes have become highly sophisticated - not to mention big business. The fundamental uses of branding remain, however, and in reviewing those uses we can see why academic research libraries have achieved such strong brand identities. At the heart of the matter is the fact that branding creates an important distinction among the products or services that may satisfy a customer's need. [Slide 2]

This central function of creating distinction among products - or, in the case of libraries, information services - provides significant benefits to the consumer.

- First, brands reduce the level of effort a consumer must put into assuring a specific, desired level of quality. A researcher or student must use his or her time and financial resources with care, and in choosing the library in which to conduct research, a "name brand" library is most likely to give a reasonable return on that investment.
- Second, brands reduce the perceived risk of making a costly mistake. Colleagues and advisors are less likely to criticize, and researchers are less likely to return empty handed from a research trip to a brand name library.
- Third, brands provide certain psychological rewards to the consumer such as prestige or status. Researchers can brag about spending a sabbatical at a prestigious, name-brand library. Compare this prestige and stature to the reaction of professional colleagues if a sabbatical were spent surfing the Web in search of scholarly materials.

But it is important to note that this function of distinction is a two-way street. Distinction has tangible benefits to the providers of products and services, such as libraries, as well as to consumers.

- First, brands facilitate repeat purchases, lowering advertising costs. Now most libraries don't actually advertise in the commercial sense, but they do promote their collections and services, and they invest considerable resources in the task of training patrons in the use of the collections. Repeat business is thus important to managing reference and patron support costs, as the new patron will consume far more staff resource than the experienced, frequent-visitor patron.
- Second, brand identity facilitates the introduction of new products if an existing product has a loyal following. For libraries, this can reduce the level of difficulty in introducing new services such as digital resources. If your patrons are happy with your print abstract and indexing selections, for example, they are quite likely to trust and use your online database choices and your information

literacy courses.

- Third, brands facilitate brand loyalty. If you saw a student through his undergraduate thesis, or if she mastered the mysteries of a research library in your facility, you will very likely have a loyal patron for life. Every experienced librarian knows full well that a newly arriving junior faculty member will have a built-in bias for the organization, services, and policies of the library where his/her PhD work was recently conducted.

Overall, the concept of brands has been exceptionally useful in the commercial world because brand identity enables the mutually beneficial establishment of a relationship between the person who has needs, and the supplier who has products and services. A predictable relationship is thus important for both consumers and producers. The concept is equally valuable in the academic world, for both researchers and libraries. Just as businesses benefit from a trusted relationship with their customers, libraries that achieve brand identity can benefit from the relationship between information provider and the information consumer.

Academic research libraries have been exceptionally fortunate in that for many years they have enjoyed a quasi-monopolistic status. This is particularly true for libraries that have deep historical roots. Even the wealthiest and most avid bibliophile could not hope to build a collection to rival that of an established academic library. Once a book or journal is out of print, a research library is typically the only place where a researcher can find and use the ideas and facts those documents possess. Historically, as academic libraries grew, defined, and refined their unique collections, universities began to see their libraries as a distinct competitive advantage. High quality libraries were an important factor in attracting high quality faculty and high quality students. Fine libraries not only enabled faculty to teach and conduct research at elite levels, they also enabled students to complete their studies at faster speeds and to higher standards.

Today, at the close of the 20th Century, we have a brave new world. The academic research library faces real and perceived competition as never before. Each new alternative to traditional scholarly communication is confidently proclaimed as the ultimate substitute for research libraries. The Los Alamos Preprint Server is touted as the low-cost, high-quality alternative to traditional physics literature - presumably extensible to all other disciplines. Commercial publishers and professional associations develop business plans and marketing strategies that will eliminate libraries and deliver books and articles directly to students and faculty - charging by the bit, of course. Meanwhile, university presidents, ever hopeful of lowering costs, wonder why the digital revolution isn't moving faster or saving more money.

How, then, should academic research libraries address the continuing need to garner support and funding? If we were commercial businesses, we would realize that one very important reason for our continued success is that we have brand equity. Thanks to our brand identity, and strong brand loyalty among our faculty and students, we can draw upon techniques from brand equity management to formulate a continued, effective response to these challenges.

Here follow some ideas that should encourage the librarian, and point to specific action items; because the study of brands in the commercial sector tells us that good brands have some remarkable characteristics in the marketplace.

[Slide 3]

First, strong brands have resiliency. They can take a hit from a new entrant in the market, or take a wrong turn under their own volition, and still bounce back. Remember how microforms were going to transform the future? - except for the fact that faculty generally despise the medium. Strong brands impart competitive advantage to the organizations that own them. Is there an academic institution anywhere that does not feature the library in its promotional literature and on its campus tours? They are the industry

leaders that define the conditions that must be met to provide customer satisfaction.

Strong brands create loyalties. In the commercial world, this makes it difficult for alternatives to pull consumers away from the branded entity. In the academic world, it means that faculty and students brag about the excellence of the services and resources available from their library. Remember, brands lower consumer effort, reduce the risk of costly mistakes, and confer psychological rewards.

Second, strong brands enjoy these attributes not as a right, but because they understand the needs of customers, and have consistently delivered a product or service that the consumer expects. In the commercial world, this is accomplished by focusing on the three elements of successful brands: Quality, Consumer attitude, and Image. In the world of higher education and academic research the same rules apply.

### Quality

[Slide 4]

Quality is absolutely essential to a strong brand. Few libraries neglect the importance of quality in their collection decisions, but libraries are often not as well equipped or experienced in service and support. Consumer research tells us that quality, in the abstract, is not sufficient to building a strong brand. Knowing that a library's collections are good is only one part of the library-user's quality perception. The patron must also feel positive about his or her experiences with the collections and, ideally, have gotten into the habit of having his/her information needs met by the library.

### Attitude

[Slide 5]

Positive attitudes about the product are the second essential element of a strong brand. Attitude is, like quality, somewhat more complex than it would appear on the surface. The attitudes that are most useful to the library are those that are formed through personal behavior. A faculty member who has a direct, positive personal library experience will have a more enduring positive attitude than a faculty member who reads about library services in a newsletter. Consumer research tells us that repeated exposure is also extremely important. The student who uses the library successfully, multiple times, is significantly more positive in his or her support. Simple techniques can help build positive attitude by reinforcing "good thoughts" at the point of service. For example, positive attitude is often successfully reinforced in the commercial world by posting signs, banners, and slogans at key points of service.

### Image

[Slide 6]

The third element of a strong brand is consistency of image. This does not mean a library should never change its image. Rather that libraries, like successful commercial brands, must not ignore the reality of their established image in the eyes of their patrons. Change should recognize that libraries, whether we like it or not, will have distinct identities in the minds of their loyal patrons. Sometimes consciously, sometimes inadvertently, we have all built brand images around our libraries, and we must be aware of our responsibility for that image. If you have cultivated an ambiance of quiet contemplation and scholarly research, for example, converting your main reading room into a bank of computer workstations over a weekend will almost certainly result in howls of protest. Remember that you have asked your patrons to participate in, and associate with, your image. As a result, you have a responsibility to your users' relationship with you. Those who neglect this reality can pay a heavy cost.

Brand management research tells us that organizations must have a strategy for bringing their customers

along with them. A classic case in point can be found in two premier US public libraries; San Francisco and New York. Each of these fine libraries has been known for many years as a "university of the people", and their research collections are historically deep and rich. It should have come as no surprise, therefore, when each encountered a storm of adverse publicity as they attempted to discard large quantities of de-accessioned material. If an image of limitless resources, spanning the knowledge of the ages, is cultivated over generations of taxpayers, there should be little wonder that the public was enraged to find books piled in a dumpster. From a brand management perspective, this was as bad a move as the attempt to dump "Classic" Coca-Cola.

The average technical university library should have far less difficulty introducing change, provided the ongoing benefits to their patrons are adequately articulated and reasonably well timed. The key is to remember that your library users have formed a relationship with your brand image, and that you disrespect that relationship at your peril.

Instinctively, academic research libraries have been rather attentive to these important issues of quality, patron attitude, and consistency of image. We have been attentive to these issues, however, not because we were consciously building equity in our library brand names, but because they are service attributes to which we aspire. Nevertheless, through these efforts, we have built a form of equity, a reservoir of enduring value, that attaches to our libraries' names. In marketing terms, we have brand equity.

If we were for-profit corporations we would be far more conscious of the value of our brand equity than we are as nonprofit libraries. Brand equity is such a well established principle in the business world that it is routinely bought and sold among companies. The importance of brand equity to libraries is equally valid, but our intentions are far different. We want to be knowledgeable about brand equity so that we might use this knowledge to further the educational and research goals of our universities, and to sustain our leadership position in the world of educational information resources. By understanding how brand equity is built and managed, we can take advantage of this hard earned equity to sustain that which is of enduring importance to education, research, and society.

What are the specific advantages of brand equity for academic research libraries? [Slide 7] First, we can use the equity in our brand names to extend our products and services into new arenas. We have already learned that library patrons will follow us into the digital arena, for example, if they have come to trust our ability to meet their needs in the print environment. In marketing circles this is known as brand extension. Ideally, brand extensions will increase the overall use of a family of products and services, and, indeed, many libraries report increased in-library activity as a result of offering digital resources. On occasion, however, an original product may find that it has been cannibalized or diluted as a consequence of a product extension. For example, many large public academic libraries in the US report that undergraduates are increasingly unwilling to utilize traditional print products, preferring to use only resources that are available online - regardless of their relevance. These libraries have been obliged, as any good consumer product would, to devise strategies to interest undergraduate students in taking advantage of the full range of library resources.

The very real risks of dilution or cannibalization highlight the importance of having an explicit brand plan for managing our products and services into new arenas. Market research suggests that you should first make sure the extension is a good fit, and that it makes sense in relation to your existing products and services. Where an extension cannot be avoided (such as electronic resources), be prepared to think through the likely impact of the extension on your current operations. Second, you would be wise to consider whether the new product or service is superior to the alternatives available to your patrons. Suppose you want your library to offer contract research services to the business community in your city. Will your service be superior to the alternatives? What do you actually know about the alternatives? Third, make sure the new product category provides the level of benefits your target patron has come to expect

from you. If you want to become a web portal, for example, are you prepared to invest the necessary resources in a quality site? A shabby or poorly maintained web site is quite likely to dilute the hard-earned brand equity of your traditional services.

Consumer research shows that a brand's ability to enter new arenas is in part a function of how dominant a brand is. So-called category leaders, those who set the standard for a product or industry, often must identify themselves with a super-ordinate concept in order to broaden their product reach. For example, when Disney entered the cruise ship market they didn't offer just another cruise ship experience. They positioned themselves to provide a full week of family-friendly entertainment at a predictable price. For libraries, the lesson here is clear. We must identify ourselves as super-ordinate providers of information resources and services, rather than as managers of books and journals. Managing books and journals is no less important than it have been in the past. It is, however, insufficient if a library is to maintain its brand equity in the face of competition from the WWW and other emerging information providers.

In the educational research environment where we have already been identified as the brand to beat, each of us had best have a strategy to manage our brand equity. [Slide 8] As we face the task before us, it is helpful to remember that brand equity is built and managed in successive stages. Depending on the age and stature of your library you may be at any one of the three distinctive stages of brand equity growth. In the first stage you will develop, if you haven't already, a quality product that has a positive image and strong name recognition. Think of this stage as building a platform. Try not to be too narrowly focused in concept, however. While you will, of course, deliver specific products and services, remember to consider your responsibilities broadly. For example, in your serials selection choices you are facilitating scholarly communication, not just buying journals.

At the second stage your goal is to explicitly manage the relationship between your brand and your patrons. Frequent exposure to your products and services is essential. Establish multiple metrics for tracking and computing your value to the organization. Insure that there is positive reinforcement about your contributions to education and research at your university. These and other useful aspects of relationship management are important at this stage.

The third and final stage is to successfully manage the brand equity in your core services into related but appropriate products and services. Those extensions will be specific to your own situation, but might include such activities as an expanded role in traditional scholarly publishing, managing your institution's educational technology, delivering data research services, offering courses in information management or information technology literacy, providing web site design and management services, or offering contract research and/or digital publishing services. Developing a reputation for appropriate extensions of your library's brand will thus position your library for other new opportunities as they are presented by the changing world of information resources, education, and research.

So, maybe it's not so bad to have the World Wide Web chasing us. After all, imitation is the sincerest form of flattery.

**Slide 1**

The World Wide Web can be viewed as an analog of the traditional research library.

- Vast amounts of information; but hard to use.
- Search tools serve many users; but user training is required
- Large sets are retrieved; but expertise is needed to filter.
- Items wanted by not be available; dead-end links and "not on shelf".

**Slide 2**

Branding provides benefits to both consumers and providers.

| Consumers | Providers |
|---|---|
| • Lowers level of effort to achieve results | • Lowers costs of promotion |
| • Reduces risk and cost of error | • Facilitates the introduction of new products |
| • Psychological rewards include prestige and status | • Facilitates repeat customers |

**Slide 3**

Academic research libraries' distinct brand identities confer value.

- Resiliency in times of change
- Competitive advantage to parent institutions and patrons alike
- "Consumer" loyalty

**Slide 4**

Strong brands exhibit consistently high quality.

- Products
- Services
- "Habit forming"
- Positive feelings

**Slide 5**

Strong brands reinforce specific kinds of positive attitude.

- Behavior based
- Repeat exposure
- Reinforcement at points of service

**Slide 6**

Strong brands exhibit a consistent image (personality).

- Change must:
  - be mindful of core identity
  - maintain valued distinctions
  - reinforce relationships

**Slide 7**

Brand equity, like other forms of equity, will erode if not managed.

- Adopt a super-ordinate concept
- Extend products and services into new arenas
  - fit
  - quality
  - benefits

**Slide 8**

Brand equity is built in successive stages.

- Develop a quality-oriented operation with a positive image and strong name recognition.
- Manage the relationship between your "brand" and your patrons.
- Extend your brand identity into related but appropriate products and services.

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*Last edited by J.F, 15th June, 1999.*